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ABSTRACT

The role of the evaluation supervisor as internal auditor and his or her responsibility for assuring the independence and objectivity of evaluation results are discussed. Four sources of compromise of objectivity are discussed: factual, political, involvement, and affective. The first two sources of compromise cannot be accepted, A code of ethical evaluation practices is needed to deal with them. The second two sources of compromise arise from people's relating to other people. Knowledge of these relationships enables the evaluation supervisor to deal as an auditor with effects. The relationship of the evaluation supervisor to the evaluator and the program manager are discussed. (Author)

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The Evaluation Supervisor as Internal Auditor

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Once the researcher leaves the area of the physical sciences, he must forego the luxury of studying subjects which can be kept at "standard temperature and pressure;" once he begins studying subjects who can "stare back" and interact with him, he must examine his own feelings about them and question his own objectivity. Being human and, hopefully, reasonably normal, he, too, has ego needs. These can influence the way he views things. It is a truism that: A glass of water can be either half full or half empty. The perspective from which an evaluator "looks" can, of course, have an impact on what he "sees." Should the researcher be in the position of having his livelihood depend on how well the subject studied likes what is said about him, then he is in a precarious position, indeed.

The above is merely to provide some perspective for a consideration of the position of evaluation services in a city school system. Essentially, one is faced with a paradox: to be useful the evaluator must be familiar with the project studied, the setting in which it is operating, and the people involved in it; to be objective he must be detached. The evaluator has to be "close enough to know you and distant enough to see you."

Responsibility for dealing with this problem (i.e., responsibility for assuring the objectivity of the evaluation) can, in my opinion, best be assumed by the evaluation supervisor, since he is familiar with the evaluation and with the system in which it is being conducted. As used in this paper, the term evaluation supervisor refers to the individual in line above the evaluator and to whom the evaluator reports. In short, it refers to the individual who must "sign off" on a report before it is published. Depending on the size of the organization, there can be more than one level of audit.

Perhaps my reasoning for the above opinion might best be illustrated by the following true incident, with only the names deleted to protect the guilty. A number of years ago, several distinguished faculty members from an equally distinguished university contracted to evaluate a large innovative program. One of their conclusions was that class size varied directly with achievement. That is, the larger the class size, the better the pupil performance. They, too, were surprised by this finding, and after further investigation discovered what thousands of professional employes already knew: classes for slow learners were purposely made smaller. One might reasonably wonder what other characteristics of the system were ignored in the evaluation.

To address the problem of assuring objectivity in evaluation, one must first identify the possible sources of compromise of objectivity. Techniques can then be developed to deal with each.

It is suggested that there are four basic sources of compromise of objectivity. Each will be discussed and ways of responding to it will be proposed.

1. Factual Compromise

This arises when the needs of the project director and the interests of the evaluator cannot be separated. It arises when the evaluator is on the budget of the project and reports directly to the project director. The continuation of the project - and therefore of the evaluator's job - may depend on a favorable report of project achievement.

In such a case, the evaluator has in fact been compromised. There is no way in which he can prevent his personal interests and his professional integrity from coming into conflict unless - happily - he is evaluating the gold producing powers of the Philosopher's Stone.

There is really no solution to this situation except to keep away from it. The Research Office should not become involved with any evaluation unless it is clearly understood that all evaluation personnel report directly to the Office of Research and Evaluation and that the office rather than the individual is responsible for the evaluation.

Various mechanisms for effecting this are in use. In some cases, evaluation funds are transferred to the budget of the Research Office. In other cases they are merely earmarked for evaluation and can be spent in no other way. The main point is that either way the evaluator must see himself as working for the Research Office (which usually has other programs to evaluate should the current one be discontinued) and not for the project director. The project is the client, and not the boss!

A yet more viable approach was recently taken by the Department of Public Welfare of the State of Pennsylvania. After receiving what they considered satisfactory assurances of the independence of the Research Office from the various Instructional Divisions of The School District of Philadelphia, they insisted on contracting directly with the Research Office for the evaluation of the Day Care Services Program for which the School District is prime contractor. This move accomplished three ends: it utilized evaluators and evaluation supervisors who either were or had the opportunity to become completely familiar with the system; it made the Evaluation Unit literally independent of the Program Unit for its funding; and it placed the State in the position of being able to hold the Research Office directly accountable for the contracted evaluation services (i.e., the State became the client).

Aside from the above, the only possible way around the problem is to insist on the use of an outside evaluator retained on a consultant basis, in the hope that the consultant fee will be a small enough part of his total income that he will be unwilling to compromise his professional integrity for it.

2. Political Compromise

This is, perhaps, the most dangerous threat to objectivity, because it may never appear "on the table." When the project under consideration is the "brain child," "claim to fame," favorite effort, or most popular program of the "powers that be," then it may be understood - perhaps tacitly - that the program is an automatic success. The role of the evaluator is to lend scientific dignity to political expediency.

Dealing with this source of compromise will prove to be impossible unless the Research and Evaluation Office is able to convince the "powers that be" that maintaining the professional integrity of the evaluator is in its best interests. Here, too, the line relationship can be critical. The most advantageous position, of course, is when the Research Office has a line to

the top separate from that of the program being evaluated. Where this is not possible, the top administration must be convinced that the protection of the professional integrity of the Research Office is in their best interests.

Several points can be made regarding this proposition. First, it can be easily shown that it is a lot cheaper to hire a public relations copywriter than to maintain a Research Office. The simple fact is that if one does not need "truth" he does not need a Research Office.

Second, most administrators do not have technical skills in research design or statistics. In a very real way their acceptance of research findings is an act of faith. Now, if an evaluator will lie for the administrator to feather his own nest, it is also possible that he will lie to the administrator to feather his own nest. How will the administrator ever know?

Of course, enlightened administrators might well see evaluation as a vehicle for program improvement. If their commitment is to the success of the program rather than to the existing form of the program, then political compromise should not arise.

If top administration is not willing to protect the Research Office from political compromise, either for the above reasons or any other, then use of an outside consultant may be the only answer.

3. Involvement Compromise

When a formative evaluation is conducted (though this might not be the only case), the evaluator becomes closely involved with project personnel. Such a relationship is necessary for his function. The evaluator is continually feeding back information on the progress of the project. Part of the responsibility of the evaluator is to interpret his findings. Where the evaluator has a good relationship with the project staff, there is a danger that the line between making recommendations based on findings and making program decisions may wear thin or disappear completely. This leaves the evaluator in the position of having to evaluate "his own baby."

Dealing with this problem requires an ongoing effort by the evaluation supervisor. Through regular supervisory conferences he needs to keep himself abreast of the evaluator's activities and question any that seem to be inappropriate.

This is not an overly difficult process except in the case of an evaluator whose credibility with program personnel is so great that they turn to him for solutions to program problems. Here it is necessary for the evaluation supervisor to intervene to interpret the role of the evaluator to program personnel. The evaluator may explain his data, interpret his data, and discuss its implications for the program being evaluated, but he may not attempt to make program decisions.

Where the evaluator is not a specialist in the area being evaluated (and this will certainly be the case with evaluators who must deal with a variety of projects), it is usually not too difficult to convince both evaluator and program personnel of the pitfalls of role confusion.

Where the evaluator is a specialist in the area being evaluated, then there is potential for much greater difficulty in avoiding role confusion. Consider, for example, the possibilities when a specialist in Early Childhood Education whose orientation is behavior modification, is evaluating an open classroom program! The evaluator may have such strong feelings about what he thinks "should be" that it will affect the way he sees what "is." The evaluation supervisor must monitor the role of the evaluator to assure that he does not compromise his objectivity by becoming involved in the operation of the program and decision making about it.

4. Affective Compromise

This category is closely related to involvement compromise. Often the evaluator builds close relationships with project personnel. This can be beneficial both in terms of facilitating his information gathering functions and in terms of acceptance of his recommendations by project personnel. On the other hand, it can easily lead to reluctance on the part of the evaluator to interpret findings in a light that is less than complimentary to the program.

Though the Research Office evaluates programs and not people, it is people and not programs who read the reports. Evaluators who work with program personnel over a period of time cannot help having feelings about them - one way or the other. Ideally this relationship has been on a strictly professional level and the evaluator is completely objective, but this cannot be guaranteed. It is the function of the evaluation supervisor, then, to keep the evaluator in perspective. The evaluation supervisor functions as an Internal Auditor to assure that the evaluation has been properly conducted, that all of the findings have been interpreted, and that all findings are clearly based on data. By knowing the evaluator, the project manager, and the relationship between the two, he will know what to expect and will be able to look for it.

At the same time, the evaluation supervisor can "take the heat" for the evaluation findings, should this be necessary. He can sympathize with how hard project personnel worked and agree that it really isn't fair that test scores weren't higher and concede that no test can ever hope to reveal the untold benefits of the program, but still insist that the evaluation will be based on findings rather than aspirations. He can make it clear that as the evaluator's supervisor, he will accept nothing less.

In summary, the first two sources of compromise - factual compromise and political compromise - cannot be accepted. They constitute a compromise of integrity. To accept them would mean the death (and rightly so) of educational evaulation.

It is suggested that a code of ethics which deals with these issues is needed for evaluators. The research and evaluation community should assume as a top priority the design and acceptance of such a code of ethics. They should enforce it by refusing to recognize any evaluation, evaluator, or Research Office which fails to subscribe to it and uphold it. Moreover, client populations (i.e., Federal and State Governmental Agencies) should be encouraged to approve such a code and make it mandatory for all projects funded, thus assuring that the independence of the evaluation is largely a matter of policy.

The second two sources of compromise, involvement compromise and affective compromise, arise from people relating to people. We shall never be free of them. The evaluation supervisor, by being aware of them, can deal with them, as suggested above.

In functioning as an Internal Auditor, the evaluation supervisor stands between the project director and the evaluator. The project director must clearly understand the supervisor's line relationship with the evaluator. (There should be no doubts in the evaluator's mind on this issue, either.)

The evaluation supervisor must be familiar with the project, the project director (other project personnel, if possible), and with the evaluator. Only in this way will he understand what the relationships involved are and know for what to be on the alert.

All of the above may paint a picture of an aversive relationship. This certainly need not be true. As long as all parties understand the roles involved and the need for them, there is no reason to expect anything but a friendly, professional relationship, especially since program improvement is - or should be - everyone's goal.